

Chapter One

The Mi'kmaq and Land

In fishing for eels, Donald Marshall Jr was doing what his ancestors had always done. But he was not fishing with his family or with other members of his home community, and though he likely kept some eels, most of the catch he sold. For Marshall's ancestors, fishing was part of a way of life that included hunting moose, gathering berries, growing corn and tobacco, making canoes, and repairing firearms. If we had asked Marshall in 1993 what his occupation was, he probably would have described himself as a self-employed fisherman – a response his eighteenth-century ancestors would not have understood. For them, fishing was not an occupation or a skill; rather, it was something they did. But in 1993, the economy of which the Mi'kmaq were part was dramatically different than it had been two hundred years before. To live, Marshall needed an occupation. In 1993 he was fishing, and selling the fish he caught to purchase things he did not make, including items for his personal use such as food and clothing. Though Marshall is Mi'kmaq, he was fishing within an economic and political system based on different precepts than had held during his ancestors' time.

This does not mean that Marshall does not think of himself as Mi'kmaq, or that we should not think of him as Mi'kmaq, simply because he is not living as his ancestors did. Rather, Mi'kmaq society has evolved over the centuries, and so too has the Mi'kmaq identity. But it is hard to understand that evolution, in part because we know so little about the Mi'kmaq before 1500.

Mi'kmaq history began long before the arrival of European fishing fleets off the Nova Scotia coast in the early 1500s. Describing that early history, however, is not so easily done. The Mi'kmaq, like other aboriginal com-